

WORKING IN COALITIONS

Often, one of the most powerful ways for nonprofits to engage in the public policy process is by working in coalition with other nonprofits. Effective coalitions can amplify nonprofit voices to legislators and the public, as well as allow coalition members to share the costs of their advocacy efforts.

>> WHAT MAKES A COALITION?

Coalitions take many forms – from formal recognized legal entities to less formal relationships without legal recognition. Coalitions can also be used for a variety of purposes, all of which are perfectly acceptable. More importantly, a coalition may change from one form to another depending on the needs and goals of the membership. Coalition structures fall along a continuum of complexity, risk, and integration in order to serve their purpose:

- Developing and implementing a shared policy agenda around a common cause (e.g., child welfare, human services, the arts, etc.)
- Coordinating efforts on a specific issue campaign
- Providing mutual support by, for example, signing onto each other's campaigns without taking a highly visible or leadership role
- Sharing information to strengthen each coalition member's respective advocacy efforts

The type of coalition you choose to join or form depends on the advocacy needs of your organization as noted in your organization's public policy plan. (Don't have a public policy plan? Developing one is a critical first step. Visit www.clpi.org to learn how.)

>> DECIDING TO JOIN A COALITION

When deciding whether or not to join or form a coalition, organizations should examine the advantages and potential challenges of membership. Some advantages of membership include:

■ INCREASED CREDIBILITY

An organization can increase the perception of its credibility by associating with recognized leaders on a particular issue and by simply being a part of a group – the power of numbers.

■ MAXIMIZED RESOURCES

Coalitions often split the cost of their work and share resources. This often allows member organizations to accomplish more than they would alone.

■ SHARED IDEAS

Coalition members gain exposure to innovative solutions and approaches and have the opportunity to learn from various members. Working in a coalition is also a good way for organizations new to advocacy to begin to engage in the public policy process.

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While there are advantages to joining a coalition, the decision to join is one that should not be taken lightly since membership can come with some challenges, particularly if the coalition is not well structured. Potential challenges organizations should consider include:

Unequal Workload - An unbalanced organization where all members do not share the work or costs.

Misplaced Recognition - Credit for success in coalitions doesn't always go where credit is due.

You're In or You're Out! Philosophy - Some coalitions push members to tow the line on a particular issue or face exclusion.

Unequal Power - Large coalitions can result in small and medium sized member organizations getting lost in the shuffle and not having their voice heard within the coalition.

Ideological Mismatch - Your organization's ideological identity is often defined by your membership in a particular coalition, so choose your affiliations carefully. However, don't rule out "unlikely partnerships." As is often said in the advocacy world, today's opponent (on one issue), may be tomorrow's ally (on a different issue).

Despite the possible challenges of participating in a coalition, nonprofits can take certain steps to maximize the advantages of membership.



- **IDENTIFY PURPOSE** - Identify the purpose before you join or create a coalition.
- **INCLUDE ALL STAKEHOLDERS** - Make sure all relevant stakeholders of the issue are represented. Be sure to think beyond the "usual suspects."
- **UNDERSTAND LIMITS** - Understand the general limits and capacity of the member organizations and distribute responsibilities equitably.
- **CREATE BYLAWS** - Create formal or informal bylaws to govern proceedings and decision-making.
- **COMMUNICATE** - Encourage open communication and healthy conflict. Make sure members can disagree without looking like obstructionists.
- **ALLOCATE RESOURCES** - Allocate resources for administrative tasks needed to run the coalition.

>> Additional Resources on Managing and Working in Coalitions

NP Action - Coalition Building Resources
<http://npaction.org/article/archive/234>

National Coalition Building Institute
www.ncbi.org

The Nimble Collaboration: Fine-Tuning Your Collaboration for Lasting Success, by Karen Ray – Fieldstone Alliance
www.fieldstonealliance.org

Fieldstone Alliance Nonprofit Guide to Forming Alliances: Working Together to Achieve Mutual Goals
www.fieldstonealliance.org